

Down The Highway
The Life of Bob Dylan
Howard Sounes
Grove Press, 2001

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reviewed by Peter Stone Brown

Bob Dylan has been the subject of innumerable books. In this (the fifth) full-scale biography, British reporter Sounes tracked down people previously unknown and apparently spent a lot of time in courthouses researching lawsuits, birth certificates, marriage licenses, real estate transactions and holding companies.

Serialized internationally, this book has gained enormous publicity from its major revelation: Dylan's secret (second) marriage to--and divorce from--(former) backup singer Carolyn Dennis, and their (now 15-year-old) child.

Sounes seems consumed by Dylan's finances. A millionaire since 1965, there is no doubt Dylan is wealthy. But his records have never sold that well, and while always touring, it's been 20 years since he's undertaken the large-scale arena tours that generate astounding profits for other musicians.

The book is documented with a 67-page list of source notes, referring to interviews, other books, articles and web sites. Despite this attention to detail, easy-to-check facts are wrong and other claims are dubious.

Blatantly wrong is calling the liner note poems for *The Times They Are A-Changin'* "Four Outlined Epitaphs," when it's "Eleven Outlined Epitaphs." Come on, all Sounes had to do was look at the album cover!

Sounes also has Dylan's 1982 induction into the Songwriter's Hall of Fame taking place at the Hilton Hotel in New York City. I was there, it was the Americana. Minor as this is, it makes every other fact questionable.

In 1963, when Joan Baez introduced Dylan as a surprise guest at her concerts, Sounes claims manager Albert Grossman negotiated a higher fee for Dylan than Baez, probably confusing this with their joint tour of early '65. He also tosses off the unsupported claim that

Dylan's second album *Freewheelin'* was selling 10,000 copies a week in summer of 1963.

Quotes from interviews and lines from songs are applied to situations that took place at another time. In discussing Dylan getting a haircut for an early '60s gig, he borrows a quote from a 1966 *Playboy* interview that was an obvious put-on.

There is also a new account of the 1966 motorcycle crash from Grossman's widow, Sally, yet the crash -- the definitive turning point in Dylan's career -- remains a mystery.

Compared to previous Dylan biographies, the writing is straightforward but ultimately dull. Despite digging up sensationalistic dirt, Sounes does not have the Albert Goldman-esque attack of Bob Spitz's *Dylan*, the sanctimonious negativity of Clinton Heylin's *Behind the Shades*, or the fawning of Robert Shelton's *No Direction Home*.

Down The Highway continually attempts to build to a big bang that never happens. Uncovering more background information (than any previous writer) about Dylan's first wife Sara Lownds, we still really don't know who she is. While a great deal is revealed about Grossman screwing Dylan financially, we learn little about their relationship. Others such as Bob Neuwirth (ever present in *Dont Look Back*) and Allen Ginsberg are dismissed in a couple of paragraphs.

Too young to have been there, Sounes misses the drama of several major events with perplexing results. The tumultuous world tour of 1965-1966 climaxes not at a concert, but in a hotel room where Grossman interrupts Dylan's lawyer explaining an important publishing contract. While this contract would affect Dylan's life for the next 20 years, the drama of that tour was on stage. Dylan's 1974 return to the stage is glossed over and the '75 Rolling Thunder tour is used as an example of Dylan's inaccessibility when all other evidence is to the contrary.

For all his research, Sounes dismisses Dylan's mid-'80s return to Judaism "as playing a part" by wearing a yarmulke at his son Jesse's bar mitzvah in Israel. A photograph of this event shows Dylan wearing tefillin which is only worn by the most religiously observant Jews and Dylan's many appearances at Chabad telethons would also support claims of his involvement as more than casual.

Thankfully, Sounes refrains from interpreting Dylan's lyrics, and the few depictions of recording sessions somehow miss the action.

Attempting to link Dylan's last album *Time Out Of Mind* to the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, he misses the one major connection, that the song "Tryin' To Get To Heaven" is composed of lines from old folk songs.

The Dylan that finally emerges is a sad, lone, and complicated eccentric, who has simultaneous relationships with various women, and is paralyzed by fame while wanting to remain in the spotlight.

The definitive Bob Dylan biography has yet to be written.